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The Dark Side of Mindfulness

Review of 'Mindlessness:

The corruption of mindfulness in a culture of narcissism'

by Thomas Joiner

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The practice and study of mindfulness has become a prominent presence in the psychological scene over the last two decades, giving rise to high hopes regarding a new understanding of mind and the development of new and efficient methods to alleviate suffering and promote well-being. In his new book “Mindlessness: The corruption of mindfulness in a culture of narcissism,” Thomas Joiner, a professor of psychology at Florida State University, FSU, asks that this enthusiasm be curbed. He suggests the practice of mindfulness has strayed from its true path. A degenerate, self-focused, version of it has found fertile ground in early 21st U.S. American culture to become a corrosive cult, spreading from university campuses (especially humanities departments), segments of the mental health profession, and a jaded liberal élite to the rest of society. In its wake, it leaves social alienation, suicide, and missed opportunities to get real help. I here review key points of Joiner’s argument, with which I agree, and then highlight some disagreements and concerns.

Consensus

Joiner is a prominent clinical and research scientist, who is particularly well known for his theory of suicide (Joiner, 2005; Van Orden, Witte, Cukrowicz, Braithwaite, Selby, & Joiner, 2010). Joiner has published some original research on mindfulness as well (Stanley, Reitzel, Wingate, Cukrowicz, Lima, & Joiner, 2006) and, as he reports in his book, he has participated in some short-term training in mindfulness practice as well.

Central to Joiner’s critical evaluation is the distinction between authentic and *faux* mindfulness. The concept of authentic mindfulness is grounded in the writings of Jon Kabat-Zinn (2013), which in turn are inspired by meditative practices traditional on the Indian subcontinent. Most generally, mindfulness is a kind of non-judgmental or “detached” state of alertness to “what is going on.” The authentically mindful person “is with” his or her

sensations and thoughts without interpreting them or imbuing them with value. Being detached, the mindful person may be feeling pain, but is not suffering. The goal of authentic mindfulness is the focusing of attention on many of these mental goings-on, either at the same time, or in succession. The latter possibility is consistent with what psychologists have learned about attention and alertness, which are by nature narrowing (Oberauer & Hein, 2012; Posner, 1973). Some advocates of mindfulness note that it is the goal of their practice to overcome this limitation and that, as Joiner recalls one coach saying, “it takes time.”

What good is the practice of mindfulness psychologically? Kabat-Zinn started out seeking to mitigate suffering from chronic pain. An early article (Kabat-Zinn, 1982) highlights some of the issues with which Joiner struggles when he tries to assess the value of authentic mindfulness. First, mindfulness meditation involves several activities such as “sweeping” one’s attention through the body, focusing on breath, holding yoga poses, as well as “walking, standing, and eating” (Kabat-Zinn, 1982, p. 36). This bundling of interventions makes it difficult to isolate the critical ingredients. Second, mindfulness meditation involves non-unique elements long recognized for their effectiveness (see Butler & Strupp, 1986, for a general discussion of this issue). Kabat-Zinn’s early study used a group format, thereby allowing social facilitation, peer pressure, and social connectedness to contribute benefits. Moreover, participants received explicit expectations that this meditation would work, and they were encouraged to commit themselves to a rigorous and time-consuming regimen. In other words, familiar forces of group dynamics, sociality, dissonance reduction, and self-binding commitment were leveraged in the name of mindfulness. Third, there were no matched comparison controls, making it impossible to assess the specific benefit of mindfulness meditation, let alone isolate the unique roles of the parts. The diversity and

fluidity of the practice of mindfulness persists today. In a recent review, Crane, Brewer, Feldman, Kabat-Zinn, Santorelli, Williams, and Kuyken (2017) report that even its essential form consists of “a wide array of teachings and practices” p. 992).

The empirical record is encouraging in that mindfulness meditation can reduce anxiety and depression, but it also suggests that the method does not improve over traditional cognitive-behavioral therapy and that concerns about expectancy effects persist (Khoury, Lecomte et al., 2013). Joiner, who cites another meta-analysis by Khoury, Lecomte, Gaudiano, and Paquin (2013), also concludes that although authentic mindfulness practice bestows psychological benefits, there is no good evidence that these benefits surpass those of certain traditional methods. Critically, the positive effects are not unique: a sensible sleep cycle, walking and other exercise, working towards a task or mission, and a connected social life, yield good results without requiring a distinctive state of mind.

If authentic mindfulness fails the test of incremental health benefits, its conceptual challenges are equally significant. Joiner questions the possibility of attaining a truly detached frame of mind. He argues that our biologically evolved minds are necessarily judgmental (not “by definition” as he says, but by necessity). Even if a pure form of non-judgmental attention may be achieved, can it be adaptive? One strong hypothesis is that perception and cognition have evolved to prepare the organism for action. How, for example, might I write an authentically mindful review without copying the entire book? Selection is inevitable, and selection requires judgment lest it be random. If judgment inheres in perception, how might it be disarmed? Some advocates of mindfulness postulate a superordinate state of mind, which nonjudgmentally contemplates “everything that is going

on” in the ordinary mind. Joiner warns that such hierarchical view of mind invites Cartesian dualism and the logical difficulties of infinite regress.

Dualism cannot account for the phenomenon of subjectivity (Krueger, Heck, & Athenstaedt, 2017). A jealous person (to use Sartre’s example) knows that he is jealous when he is jealous, and that the “when he” clause requires the “that he” clause in order to be true. The nature of subjectivity is that the state in question (jealousy) requires its own recognition in order to exist. Subjectivity, and self-awareness more broadly, denies the ordinary distinction between subject and object. In that sense, the self-aware mind is one; it is not two, where one mind nonjudgmentally observes the other, judging, mind. Joiner also recognizes the problem of infinite regress, or “recursion.” If we assume a secondary mind observing the primary one, why not assume a tertiary mind observing the secondary one, *et cetera, ad nauseam?*

Joiner then turns to his main argument, which is that a vulgar version of mindfulness has spread in the populace like a parasite in the large intestine. *Faux* mindfulness not only corrodes the mind by promoting narcissism and withdrawal from productive work, but it also fosters the self-gratifying illusion that the practitioner is initiated into a spiritual élite, the members of which will find individual happiness and be recognized – in time – as the saviors of society. The desire for an aristocracy of mind is an ancient theme (Plato’s Republic is a classical playbook) in the West as well as in the East, though not in less stratified hunter-gatherer societies (Sapolsky, 2017).

The sociology of science is an instructive contrast. Scientists are an élite caste of mind, but they know – on a good day – that their expertise, however deep, is limited in range. They also know that the fruits of their labors are to be public; hence they seek to share their

hard work in PUBLICATIONS. By necessity instead of hubris, scientists must master arcane vocabularies to communicate with one another with precision. The sociology of religion and other cults (including some pockets of the humanities) is different. Here we see a self-serving differentiation between a priestly caste, and the lay folk. The priests are initiates to the mysteries that must not be shared with the lay folk. This special knowledge affords a claim to mental superiority and material entitlement. Is it fair to use the metaphor of mysteries to characterize mindfulness? Perhaps so. It remains necessary to invite research participants to follow mindfulness instructions and then to observe their behavior and self-reported inner states. There are no good indirect cues, such as a unique facial expression, to reveal the presumed mental state. Neuroimaging studies show intriguing correlates to the practice of mindfulness, but it is not clear whether these changes are unique it (Tang, Hölzel, & Posner, 2015). Claims of the existence of mindfulness continue to depend on claims of those who think they are experiencing them and validation by others making the same claim.

Joiner's main concern is that *faux* mindfulness encourages complacency as well as dysfunctional habits of self-absorption, self-enhancement, self-centeredness, and social disinterest at worst. Like others (e.g., Bertrand Russell in his wonderful and largely forgotten 1930 book *The conquest of happiness*), Joiner views self-absorption as a sickness, or at least as a serious risk factor of sickness. Much psychological research corroborates this view. Self-focused thought is unproductive (even 'boring' according to Russell) and it disengages the person from the community. Given this state of affairs, the best path to mental health leads away from self-preoccupation. Of course, authentic mindfulness seeks to achieve just this, but Joiner provides examples from his clinical practice at FSU to show the value of ordinary activities such as walking in nature and talking with friends and even teeth brushing for

lifting a person out of self-absorption and into a better mood. Physical activity and social connection (and a sound sleep cycle) are adaptive solutions to a healthy life, shaped by 10,000 generations of ancestors. So what of mindfulness? What art thou, that we shall be mindful of thee? Besides its conceptual problems and contradictions and its evolutionary untestedness, mindfulness must respond to the charge that it is a type of escapism. The yoga mat is Joiner's favorite metaphor for inactive self-indulgence (again, my words are harsher than his). At the escapist end of the mindfulness spectrum, the mind may be full but the hands are empty. The mindful person doesn't get anything done (Krueger, 2014).

Concerns

At times, we need a book like Joiner's. The public needs to hear from those who expose a sham, warn of dangerous social trends, and suggest a better way. Joiner fills this role and he has impressive expertise and experience to back him up. As well, he writes with clear, powerful, and unsparing prose. He reminds me of some of the ancient prophets of Israel, especially Amos, who saw the signs of their times and the seeds of cultural decline, who remembered a better way and urged the people to return to it. Many such prophets are tragic figures, with their greatness only recognized centuries later. At the time, the cultural trends they lament are too strong to be reversed by a sermon or a book. I know Thomas Joiner to be a fearless man. He lives the virtues he extols in writing. And he says that he does without false modesty. He works, he is connected to his family and community, he has honor, and he disdains facile compromises.

So what are my concerns? A conceptual concern is that one of Joiner's key arguments is not fully developed. It is comparatively easy to define and evaluate fairly the pure form of an idea. Modifications, degenerations, and dilutions are harder to deal with because they are

more variable. Mindfulness can become *faux* in many ways. Joiner focuses on the self-absorbed variant of *faux* mindfulness with its heightened attention to the self and the prototypical bragging about that very thing in the social media. However, a key question remains unanswered. Does the mindfulness vogue exacerbate existing trends of individualism and self-absorption in the sense that it produces an increment that will remain when the vogue itself has vanished? This is a difficult question to address, but the answer would tell us whether critics should be truly worried or merely annoyed.

A related concern is that Joiner's book is under-referenced. There are little over 100 bibliographical references, which amounts to roughly .6 of one reference per page of text. Often I found myself wondering about the source of a claim only to find none. On p. 162, for example, Joiner describes – without giving a reference – an FSU study that failed to show a benefit of “self-hugging” to those subjected to a social exclusion treatment.

Another conceptual concern is that Joiner might be overplaying the benefits of regimented life. Although he is careful to note that he does not wish to promote a militarized society, admiring references to the (U.S. American) military abound. At times, these references flirt with a selfless-hero mythology that glosses over those aspects of uniformed service that limit individual agency, autonomy, and happiness. Perhaps understandably, Joiner's own rootedness in the culture of the American South manifests itself in his narrative, but it lowers the book's overall impact. Much of the material is anecdotal. To illustrate, let me counter one of Joiner's experiences with one of my own. Joiner reports that one particular mindfulness technique, “acceptance and commitment therapy” (ACT), has a poor track record. He submits that “at NASA and at most elements of the Department of Defense” [] “the atmosphere would be sober in the face of unsupportive results” (p. 80). My experience

with a U.S. Army committee, chaired by a four-star general was different. The Army had invested millions in a *Comprehensive Soldier Fitness* program based on the ideas of Professor Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania. The program contains elements of mindfulness psychology (Krueger, 2011). In a workshop with Army personnel and skeptical psychologists, Army psychologists presented the data available at the time. They were beneath hope. When I asked the general how poor the results would have to be for Army decision-makers to conclude that investments into soldiers' mental health be made elsewhere, he retorted that there was no such contingency. Like others, the military is vulnerable to the sunk-cost fallacy, eyes wide open.

With frequent references to the military and the virtue ethics of the American South (see Pettigrew, in press, for a review of a book on the culture of the South), Joiner draws a close parallel between toughness and mental health. The general point is well taken; the question is whether it might blind us to empathy with and compassion for others. Although Joiner endorses other-directed compassion, and reserves criticism for navel-gazing self-compassion, he leaves open the question of how other-directed compassion may interact with the general "suck-it-up" imperative. Seeking to transcend the realm of Southern soldiers of honor, Joiner turns to the philosophy of stoicism of late antiquity. He introduces Cato the Elder as the *Urtyp* (archetype) of the successful stoic military man. Carthage was ultimately destroyed as Cato had tirelessly demanded, and Western textbooks still celebrate the event. The Carthaginians would presumably demur, but they died. Cato the Elder was in fact no stoic. Despite praising his many virtues and accomplishments, Plutarch (1904, section 23) also portrays him as an obnoxious rustic and misogynist who despised Greek philosophy coming into vogue among Roman sophisticates like Scipio Africanus. His great-grandson,

Cato the Younger, did admire stoicism, but he is not remembered as a destroyer of cities. There is, in fact, a deep tradition of stoicism in clinical psychology, which Joiner neglects to mention. The late Albert Ellis (1962), for example, would also have dismissed the mindfulness industry as a self-indulgent and self-damaging cultural enterprise.

A final question is how an author might present himself to the audience. I have noted elsewhere that the author's personality tends to leak from the page in unintended and sometimes ironical ways (e.g., Krueger, 2008, 2012; Krueger & Kutzner, 2017). Joiner has it tough here. He is highly accomplished, but how does he (or his publisher) convey this in a measured way? The "about the author" section (pp. 205-206) informs us that besides 17 books, Joiner has "more than 580 peer-reviewed publications," which amounts to roughly one article every two weeks over a quarter of a century. It beggars the imagination, as Thomas would say. I might not have pointed this out were it not for the clarification that his named professorship and one of his awards "are the single highest honor bestowed, respectively, by FSU and the American Psychological Association of Suicidology," and the note of two appearances on the Dr. Phil Show. This is a bit much and not quite in the spirit of Cato the Elder, who "used to say that he preferred to do right and get no thanks, rather than to do ill and get no punishment (Plutarch, 1904, section 8).

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